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DONALD G. SHEEHY

"Stay unassuming": the Lives of Robert Frost

> You seem to reason that because my mother was religious, I must have been religious too at any rate to start with. You might just as well reason that because my father was irreligious I must have been irreligious too . . . It would be terribly dangerous to make too much of all this.
>
> To Lawrance Thompson (1948) (*SL*, 529)

> When you get around to do my biography, don't try to make it too long, too detailed, too exhaustive and exhausting. Make it somehow sprightly and entertaining so that it will have some zip to it.
>
> To Lawrance Thompson (1954)[1]

"Robert Frost was so fascinated by the story of his life that he never tired of retelling it."[2] Thus Lawrance Thompson opened the first paragraph of the introduction to the first volume of the official biography. In the thirty-three years since the publication of *Robert Frost: The Early Years*, neither have readers of Frost tired of retelling, untelling, or simply telling off Thompson. The "Frost biographical wars," as Christopher Benfey remarks in a review of Jay Parini's 1999 *Robert Frost: A Life*, continue unabated, and at the center of the conflict stand opposed the public figure of the poet as venerable Yankee sage and the figure of the private man as "monster" inscribed in Thompson's biography. The distortion in both aspects of this Janus-Frost has in recent years drawn an impressive array of critics and biographers into the fray, among them William H. Pritchard, Stanley Burnshaw, John Evangelist Walsh, Lesley Lee Francis, Jeffrey Meyers, and, as mentioned, Jay Parini.

As a composite portrait, biographical revision has given contemporary readers a richer, more intriguingly complicated, if often contradictory, image of the poet. Working from new perspectives and often with new materials, it has shed light on aspects of the poet's character and experience obscured by layers of sentimental hagiography and pseudo-psychoanalytic formulae. In taking refutation of Thompson not only as a procedural principle but also as a moral obligation, however, biographical revision has tended to look

through the official biographer rather than look at him, and thus to overlook what may be of most value in the work to which he devoted his professional life. Thompson contributes most to our understanding of Frost, I believe, by the very terms of his failure to arrive at his own. Many reasons there certainly are to dispute Thompson's biographical resolutions, but no good reason to dismiss his realizations about a Frost biographer's particular difficulties.

To an unusual extent in Frost, any consideration of the poet's life entails a reconsideration of the many and various "lives of the poet." Having achieved literary prominence in early middle-age, Frost spent virtually his entire career as the conscious – and often self-conscious – subject of one or another biographical study. Certainly, as the examples of Gorham Munson, Sidney Cox, Robert Newdick, and a host of interviewers amply testify, the entanglements of Frost's life-telling long antedate the appointment of Thompson as official biographer in 1939. What an unanticipated quarter-century of witness provided Thompson, however, was an opportunity to compile a rich variety of Frost's self-accounting and the obligation – or so he came to believe – to resolve them fully into accord not only with each other but with a body of verifiable "fact." Thompson had agreed to the stipulation that the official biography not be published until after Frost's death. As a result, he spent the next twenty-five years as the most interested – and the least disinterested – "reader" of the poet's autobiography-in-progress, an ongoing romance in and out of verse in which telling the life and living the tale had grown inextricably entwined.

"The traditional version of the problematic of autobiography," Paul John Eakin observes in *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention*, "has focused on the apparently antithetical claims of truth and fiction that are necessarily involved in any attempt to render the materials of a life history in a narrative form." Eakin notes, however, that a paradigm shift has occurred. "Autobiography in our time," he concludes, "is increasingly understood as both an art of memory and an art of the imagination; indeed memory and imagination become so intimately complementary in the autobiographical act that it is usually impossible for autobiographers and their readers to distinguish between them in practice."[3]

Taking liberties at the border between memory and imagination was Frost's delight – and Thompson's torment. What Eakin describes as the "play of the autobiographical act" corresponds, of course, to what Frost called the "freedom of the material." It enables, in a sense, "the figure a life makes":

> I tell how there may be a better wildness of logic than of inconsequence. But the logic is backward, in retrospect, after the act. It must be more felt than seen

> ahead like prophecy. It must be a revelation, or a series of revelations, as much for the poet as for the reader. For it to be that there must have been the greatest freedom of the material to move about in it and to establish relations in it regardless of time and space, previous relation, and everything but affinity . . . All I would keep for myself is the freedom of my material – the condition of body and mind now and then to summons aptly from the vast chaos of all I have lived through. (*CPPP*, 777–78)

Troubled by Newdick's biographical "sleuthing," even as he authorized it, Frost had expressed concern to John Holmes, who wrote to Newdick in March of 1939: "[Frost] said he had spent his life heaping up piles of building material – friends, experiences, memories – and leaving them behind him unused to be used sometime when, as and how he wished. He said that this material he feels is his possibly for poems, and that once shaped by another hand isn't quite his any more."[4] A concern about "rights" to raw material is still evident in 1959, when the eighty-five-year-old poet wrote to reassure Thompson that Elizabeth Sergeant's *Robert Frost: The Trial by Existence*, with which he had actively cooperated, would not steal the official biography's thunder.

> I've meant to give you all the advantages, supply you with all the facts, and keep nothing back, *save nothing out for my own use even in case I ever should write my own story*. And I have left entirely to your judgment the summing up and the significance. You've had a long time to turn me over in your mind looking for some special phrase or poem to get me by. By now you may think you have plucked the heart out of my secret and I don't care if you have. All is easy between us. (*SL*, 584; italics mine)

All was *not* easy with Thompson. He had cooperated with Sergeant under the assumption that her project was not biographical but critical, and he felt himself betrayed. Frost, however, could take satisfaction in Sergeant's book. *The Trial by Existence* met Frost's primary criterion by decorously rendering the particulars of personal life not for their own sake but to convey an idealized account of the tribulations and triumphs of the poet's spirit.

Tracing the course of modern autobiographical theory, Eakin locates a source in what Stephen Marcus finds everywhere implicit in Freud – that "'a coherent story is in some manner connected with mental health,'" and that "from this perspective, 'illness amounts at least in part to suffering from an incoherent story or an inadequate narrative account of oneself.'"[5] Eakin dwells at length – and in strikingly Frostian terms – upon James Olney's *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography* (1972): "For Olney, the dominant trope of autobiography is metaphor, a term which in his extended usage includes all the 'order-produced and order-producing, emotion-satisfying

theories and equations . . . by which the lonely subjective consciousness gives order not only to itself but to as much of objective reality as it is capable of formalizing and of controlling.'"[6] Acknowledging a debt to William James, Olney defines the self in experiential and operational terms:

> The self expresses itself by the metaphors it creates and projects, and we know it by those metaphors; but it did not exist as it now does and as it is now before creating its metaphors. We do not see or touch the self, but we do see and touch its metaphors: and thus we "know" the self, activity or agent, represented in the metaphor and the metaphorizing.[7]

From a "developmental perspective," as Eakin observes, "the autobiographical act is revealed as a mode of self-invention that is always practiced first in living and only eventually – sometimes – formalized in writing" (8–9). For Frost, the practice of autobiographical self-invention and its formalization in art or rhetoric were integral and continuous, woven warp-and-woof through the fabric of his poetry, prose, correspondence, and conversation. In a remarkable letter to Lawrence Conrad in 1929, Frost touched upon the unsettling effect of being shaped by another's hand in terms that anticipate not only the Jamesian belief-into-fulfillment he would expound in his essay "Education by Poetry" (1930, *CPPP*, 717), but also the meditation on being-in-time at the heart of "Carpe Diem" (1939).

> Every little while you give me a strange picture of myself in something you say. You must be mistaken in thinking of me as ever having known what I was about. The present is least of the three times I live in. The future comes next. I live in that by a number of beliefs I want left vague – God-man-and-self-beliefs. I never know what is going to happen next because I don't dare to let myself formulate a foolish hope. Much less do I know what is happening now: I am too flooded with feeling to know. I suppose I live chiefly in the past, in realizing what happened and taking credit for it just as if I had predetermined it and consciously carried it out. But Lord Lord – I am never the creature of high resolve you want to have me. I have simply go[ne] the way of the dim beliefs I speak of dimly because I don't want them brought out into the light and examined too exactly. They wont bear it I may as well admit to forestall ridicule.[8]

Contrary to critical truism, Thompson was oblivious neither to the complexities of his subject nor to the methodological indeterminacies of his genre. While his project was finally undermined, in Leon Edel's terms, by the psychological confusion of his personal involvement with his subject and by the sheer abundance of his materials, Thompson remained acutely aware of the problematic nature of his biographical enterprise. Outlining in retrospect the praxis of the "new biography," Edel described in *Writing Lives*

(1984) a methodology "related to the methods of Sherlock Holmes and also to those of Sigmund Freud"[9]:

> The writing of lives is a department of history and is closely related to the discoveries of history. It can claim the same skills. No lives are led outside history or society; they take place in human time. No biography is complete unless it reveals the individual within history, within an ethos and a social complex.[10]
>
> The biographer needs to discover human self-deceptions (or defenses, which they usually are). Such deceptions may become a covert life-myth out of which lives – and biographies – are fashioned. No biography can be effective if the subject's self-concept is not studied: the private myth provides a covert drive and motivating force.[11]

In such context, it is instructive to look again at Thompson's introduction to *The Early Years*:

> Robert Frost was so fascinated by the story of his life that he never tired of retelling it. A good raconteur, he naturally varied his accounts, and whenever the bare facts troubled him, he discreetly clothed them with fictions. This imaginative process caused him to mingle self-deceptions with little falsehoods; it even caused him gradually to convince himself that some of these fictions were genuine truths. But only a few of his listeners knew the facts well enough to notice the discrepancies and even the best-informed were not inclined to challenge. They knew he resented criticism. Besides, some of his fictions amounted to mythic variations which artistically revealed this important fact: he wanted his best versions of the story to dramatize the fulfillment of ideals he had cherished since boyhood.[12]

Knowing to what end Thompson's own resentments led, it is easy to find here, in word choice and emphasis, signs of a failure of perspective. Ultimately, Thompson blurred a distinction crucial for Edel: "[T]he biographer must learn to understand man's ways of dreaming, thinking and using his fancy. This does not mean that a biographical subject can be psychoanalyzed; a biographical subject is not a patient and not in need of therapy."[13] Not yet committed fully to a diagnostic model taken from his reading of Karen Horney's *Neurosis and Human Growth*,[14] Thompson self-consciously attempts to articulate and justify a controlling metaphor – a shaping myth – for the biography.

> [Frost] had many reasons for wanting to conceal some of his most precious beliefs, even while he was trying to shape his life in accordance with his persistently mythic ideals of heroism. But in his autobiographical accounts he could not resist calling attention to evidence of his kinship with heroes. His retelling always pointed up his struggles and triumphs, in the face of almost "insuperable odds," hurts, and humiliations.

Taken loosely, as Frost would be taken, this metaphor could indeed carry us deeper and deeper into the poet's meaning, from "Into My Own" to *In the Clearing*. If the life – as rendered graceful by art – were to stand as a "constant symbol," then it was of the essence that the tale be brought "to a rounded conclusion and then be judged for whether any original intention it had has been strongly spent or weakly lost" (*CPPP*, 786). "Near the end," Thompson observes, "while he was still acting out the final scenes of the story he was also telling, Frost never missed a chance to point out mythic roundings-off and fulfillments." And if the poet was "inclined to boast when discussing fulfillments," the biographer allows that "his accomplishments exceeded his boasts."[15]

Is the biographer's task to censure? Explain? Appreciate? Expose? Diagnose? From the tangled web of his own emotional, moral, and psychological responses to Frost, Thompson was never able to extricate himself. To his credit, he attempted – albeit with an aggrieved punctiliousness – to elevate uncertainty to a methodological principle.

> It should be obvious, then, that in time certain of these details must be modified by documents or evidences which have not yet come to light. It is even more obvious that some of the interpretations, here developed, will be altered. But the primary goal, still valid, is to increase the general knowledge about Robert Frost, as man and as poet.[16]

Acknowledging the intrinsically provisional nature of biography, Thompson not only accepted the inevitability of revision but endeavored to enable it. "A properly assembled documentary biography," Edel observes, "is in effect a kind of miniarchive," and if Thompson's biography falls short of Edel's standard for "art," it certainly possesses the virtues of the "organizing imagination."[17] Although obscured by their own plenitude, the endnotes to *The Early Years* and to *The Years of Triumph* provide alternative accounts of events, supplemental texts, direct authorial commentary, and a bibliographical documentation of sources that comprised, at the time of publication, a virtual finding guide to the major Frost collections. And although economic considerations certainly figured in his decision, Thompson's preservation of his accumulated research materials and correspondence, working notes and outlines, and the more than 1500 typescript pages of "Notes from Conversations with Robert Frost," from which he had planned to abstract and publish "The Story of a Biography," stands as an invitation – and a challenge – to any who would revisit the scene of the biography.[18]

"Every bit of my career in or outside of school," Frost remarked in a 1925 interview, "began in Lawrence."[19] The fifteen years between his dislocation

to Lawrence in 1885 – aged eleven and recently bereft of his father – and his relocation to Derry in 1900 were pivotal to the formation of the poet's character and convictions. Frost attended school, played, worked, courted, and came to maturity during a turbulent time in the history of the "Immigrant City," a period of untrammeled industrial expansion, unprecedented waves of immigration, and ethnic and labor strife that Donald Cole would later characterize as "decades of despair." Of the Lawrence interval, however, Frost criticism in general, and post-Thompson biographical criticism in particular, has had relatively little to say, and much of what has been said is of dubious scholarly authority.

Among the defining life episodes of which Frost never tired telling, none was more fraught with symbolic and emotional significance – nor more susceptible to continual revision – than the tale of his removal in 1900 from the environs of industrial Lawrence to a farm in Derry purchased with funds supplied by his paternal grandfather. Indeed, the complications that have attended Frost biography throughout are immanent in its first public mention. "There is perhaps as much of Frost's personal tone in the following little catch . . . as in anything else," Ezra Pound noted of "In Neglect" in a May 1913 review of *A Boy's Will*: "It is to his wife, written when his grandfather and his uncle had disinherited him of a comfortable fortune and left him in poverty because he was a useless poet instead of a money-getter."[20] Thompson recounts that Pound gave Frost a copy of the review, and Frost was horrified to discover that "his dramatic fictions concerning the inhumanities of his grandfather and uncle had been paraphrased in it."[21] In July 1913, Frost complained to F. S. Flint about the review. "But tell me I implore what on earth is a midden if it isn't a midden," he mocked, "and where in hell is the fitness of a word like that in connection with what I wrote on a not inexpensive farm." "Not inexpensive, that is, to his grandfather," Thompson mocked in turn, noting that the value of the Derry farm changed radically for Frost to suit his metaphorical purpose.[22]

Indistinct as his life and character remain, William Prescott Frost, Sr. was clearly a signal figure in Frost's life. After conversations with the poet in the 1950s, Elizabeth Sergeant noted that "When Frost speaks of his grandfather today, he looms as a sort of fateful, archetypical image in the background of his adolescent and young life: an image of severity and power, gigantesque."[23] The nature of Frost's conflicted recollections of the extent of his grandfather's sway over events in his early life loomed large as well in Thompson's judgments.[24]

Thompson's notes reveal that his knowledge of persons and incidents accumulated gradually out of Frost's retellings and his own inquiries. Disturbed by inconsistencies and contradictions, he early resolved that Frost

was a self-serving liar and later that he was a self-justifying neurotic. Thompson's response to Frost's grandfather stories was particularly acute, perhaps because Frost seemed so determined to conceal certain facts about the nature and extent of W. P. Frost's financial assistance. Reviewing notes after a session with Frost in 1941, Thompson remarked on the move to England: "Of course Frost forgets that his grandfather's estate made this as much possible as his grandfather's farm." For the ten years that W. P. Frost's will required Frost to maintain ownership of the farm, he received a cash annuity of $500; thereafter, the amount was $800. Noting that the poet had never before supplied financial details about the move, he concluded that "Frost has always been disgustingly lucky for one so disgustingly lazy" and warned himself that "one must not overplay the years of poverty because they weren't really poverty at any time." In a summary of conversations in 1946, Thompson noted that "Frost is more generous toward his grandfather, and says he sees how he had to guard his means with scrupulous care because there wasn't enough to permit waste."[25] In 1939, Frost had dismissed his grandfather's wealth as a "mere competence," but when Thompson pointed out in 1951 that W. P. Frost had destroyed the notes of loans for the poet's stay at Harvard from 1897 to 1899 – having already defrayed the expense of his year at Dartmouth – Frost "grudgingly" acknowledged, "He was that decent anyway." Thompson felt the implication to be that the elder Frost had been "quite indecent in other ways."[26] Thompson's sympathies, one concludes, had come to rest with the "old gentleman."

The "years of poverty" to which Thompson refers specifically are those on the Derry farm, of which Frost's various early accounts had contributed to such misimpressions as Amy Lowell's 1917 portrait of a "young man working from morning till night to tear a living out of the thin soil."[27] Thompson's inquiry into the provisions of the estate of W. P. Frost and the financing of the Derry property dispelled any doubt that Frost had ever been required to eke out a subsistence on a marginal farm in Derry or elsewhere – a misrepresentation Frost had himself taken occasional pains to clarify in later years.[28]

Other issues, however, have remained clouded: What constituted "real poverty" in Lawrence at the turn of the century and what would Frost's experience of it have been? What did an adolescent Frost understand the socio-economic status of his family to be and by what standards and assumptions would he have construed a social identity? And finally, what light might further exploration of these questions shed upon the poet's art and thought?

In a 1937 talk published as "Poverty and Poetry" (1938), Frost prefaced a reading of "A Lone Striker" with a critique of the prevailing politics of class and a defense of those he called "my people," "the ordinary folks,"

"the country neighbors" among whom he had lived. "Some of them had been educated and some of them hadn't," he declared. "They were all much the same" (*CPPP*, 759). In buttressing his authority with an account of his own experience, however, he turned back not only to the accustomed terrain of rural New England but also to the streets of the mill city, to contest the legitimacy – even on that ground – of a radical social history:

> I was brought up in a family who had just come to the industrial city of Lawrence, Massachusetts. My grandfather was an overseer in the Pacific Mills. They had just come to the city from Kingston, New Hampshire, up by Exeter.
>
> The other day I was reading a book called *A Proletarian Journey* by a boy named Fred Beal. His family ran into more poverty in Lawrence than I ran into. I ran into some: I don't know how to measure poverty (I'm not boasting). His people went right down and he went to work at fourteen years of age in two of the same mills that I worked in. He talks of himself as a proletarian; he went radical. It is a very interesting book to me because he names overseers and men at the mill – and all people I knew. He was twenty years after me. We had memories of the farm and the country that I went back to. I walked out of it all one day. (*CPPP*, 759–60)

Challenging Beal's self-avowed proletarian status, Frost scoffs genealogically:

> Now Fred Beal, who calls himself [a proletarian], is a Beal and a Hay [sic] of New Hampshire. Right away that's something a little different; he never knew the peasant life of Europe. He also counts himself a kin of Hannibal Hamlin, who was Vice-President with Lincoln in his first administration – that is another thing. For no matter how educated or poor a man is, a certain level up there in Vermont and New Hampshire stays about the same. We people just sort of fountain up, jet up out of it. (*CPPP*, 760)

A Proletarian Journey tells a different story, for Beal had indeed dared to be "radical" when young. Convicted of murder after the Gastonia, North Carolina textile strike he had helped to organize in 1929, he had fled to the Soviet Union and remained there until disillusionment with Stalinism in the mid-30s brought him back to the United States and prison. He too, however, had been brought up in a family who had come to the industrial city of Lawrence with memories of farm and country. "Like all Yankees," he begins, "my relatives claim that our family is descended from 'pure' Mayflower stock."[29] At age fourteen in 1888, Robert Frost enrolled at Lawrence High School, choosing the "classical," or college preparatory, course of study. Living in Salem Depot, NH, where his mother had been teaching in the district school since 1886, Frost, along with his sister Jeanie, commuted daily

to school by train, using passes purchased by W. P. Frost, Sr. The story of the Frost family in Lawrence had been in its main features a saga like many other successes.

When W. P. Frost, Sr. died in 1901, *The Evening Tribune* for July 11 noted on the front page the passing of a former president of the Common Council and mill overseer. Mill overseer was a position of considerable responsibility. He hired, fired, and directed the overall operations of departments or rooms with workforces that numbered in the hundreds. As long as he satisfied production standards, he exercised a virtually total discretionary authority. In Lawrence in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the position was held by English, Irish, Yankee, and to a lesser extent, German males. Although not in the same category as mill agents or others in the manufacturing elite, they enjoyed a relatively high socio-economic status. As members of an upwardly mobile managerial class, they also provided greater educational and professional opportunity to their children; W. P. Frost, Jr., for instance, was sent by his parents to Harvard.

The three-story, white-clapboard home of W. P. and Judith Colcord Frost in the thoroughly respectable precinct of Haverhill Street stood adjacent to that of Elihu W. and Lucy Frost Colcord, who had themselves enjoyed considerable success in Lawrence. After a failed adventure in the California gold fields, Elihu Colcord opened a belt manufacturing firm in 1853 to service the industries of the nascent mill city. As noted in the *Biographical Review, Volume XXVIII: Containing Life Sketches of Leading Citizens of Essex County, Massachusetts* (1898), he carried on the business in his own building from 1856 to 1873, selling out after a very successful and prosperous career.

Recollecting the relocation to Lawrence, Frost repeatedly emphasized to Thompson that Isabelle Frost and her children were perceived by the elder Frosts and Colcords to be "poor relations" and received as unwelcome obligations. Given age, occupation, and habit, W. P. Frost may very well have been stern in demeanor and even severe in his moral and fiscal economies, but Frost's complaints of cruelty seem, as Thompson concluded, unwarranted. In summarizing the years between Frost's arrival in Lawrence and his graduation from high school, Meyers evokes a scene of grim destitution and struggle in the absence of family succor.[30]

In the narrative of *The Early Years*, Thompson strikes many of the same chords, while relegating to notes his doubts about Frost's judgment of his Lawrence elders. W. P. Frost, Sr. had provided funds to bring his son's widow and children from San Francisco, and upon their arrival in the early summer of 1885 had housed them on the third floor of his home. Within weeks, perhaps motivated by tensions in the household, Isabelle agreed to spend the summer at the New Hampshire farm of Benjamin and Sarah Frost Messer,

her late husband's uncle and aunt. They remained long enough for the children to enroll in a nearby school, but returned to Lawrence shortly after the fall term began. After living briefly with the Colcords, Isabelle rented furnished rooms on lower Broadway, a more congested neighborhood of commercial and residential structures, with money lent by Elihu Colcord. Early in 1886, she took a replacement position in a school in Salem Depot, NH, about ten miles to the northwest, living first in a boardinghouse and later taking rooms in the home of a local farmer. Throughout his account, Thompson emphasizes Frost's bitter resentment that neither grandfather nor uncle had helped his mother secure a post in Lawrence. Belle Frost, however, was then a teacher of limited formal credentials and slight experience – she had been an assistant teacher in a Columbus, OH high school and taught one year with W. P. Frost, Jr. at a small academy in Lewistown, PA – and had not taught in more than a decade. Her status as a widowed mother would also have been a serious obstacle in a system in which unmarried women were strictly the norm.

Over the next six years, the family's financial circumstances fluctuated with Mrs. Frost's ability to maintain classroom discipline. After two years of mounting complaints in Salem, she resigned, having been held in warm regard by those families whose aspirations extended beyond grammar school. Between 1890 and 1893, she taught at four public schools in Methuen, MA, each transfer the result of discipline problems. Paid $300 per academic year in Salem, she earned between $350 and $450 in Methuen. The average annual wage in Lawrence in the years from 1885 to 1893, by comparison, fell from $325 to less than $300. At $10 per week, Mrs. Frost's wage would have been equal to that of a highly skilled male operative in the mills.[31] The apartment on Haverhill St. to which the Frosts moved in 1890 to be nearer Lawrence High School was in a working-class neighborhood; when Mrs. Frost transferred in 1892, the family occupied a comfortable apartment on Upper Broadway in Methuen. Her resignation from the Methuen system necessitated a return to more modest lodgings at 96 Tremont St. in Lawrence. As her tutoring grew into a private school, however, she relocated first to an office building on Essex St. – where Robert and Elinor were married in December 1895 – and then to a spacious house on Haverhill St., extra rooms of which they let to boarders.

Thompson's accounts, and Meyers', of forlorn tenements notwithstanding, the Frosts were at no time slum dwellers. The abysmal living conditions for which Lawrence would become notorious during the Bread and Roses strike of 1912 had yet to develop fully while Frost lived in the city, though the process had begun. Between 1890 and 1912, immigrants from southeastern Europe would double the city's population, an influx that forced tenements

to climb higher and cluster closer together. At first, most were only two stories high, but by 1895, 957 were three stories or more, the great majority in the central wards where the immigrants lived. By 1910, even the four-story building was common with 268 in the city center. While the density of population rose from 7 persons per acre to 10 between 1870 and 1890, it jumped to 20 by 1910; in the most crowded districts the figure grew to 119 per acre. A 1911 survey of five half blocks on Common, Oak, and Valley Streets, the most densely populated and poorest in the city, found that each held 300 to 600 per acre. Occupied by an average of 1.5 persons per room, the wooden tenements were often so closely crowded to the side and back that the back rooms of the front building and all of the rear had virtually no natural light.[32]

One certain indicator of social status in turn-of-the-century Lawrence was access to education beyond grammar school. The Lawrence High School Class of 1892, of which Frost and Elinor White were co-valedictorians, numbered only thirty-five students, all of whom – as the *Order of Exercises* makes evident – were of Anglo-Saxon ethnic derivation. The *High School Bulletin*, of which Frost was editor, provided in September 1891 an equally homogeneous list of seventy-two other students who had left the class over the previous three years. In the same issue, and with the pomposity of adolescent privilege, Frost editorialized about the relative distinction of his fellow scholars. While lacking the prestige of a private academy, Lawrence High School nonetheless conferred upon its graduates a real, if local, degree of social and academic distinction.

Encouraged in his studies and in such activities as the Debating Union, the *Bulletin*, and the football team, Frost was assured that family support for college waited at the successful completion of his high school career. Toward that end, and despite the immediate budgetary constraints under which Mrs. Frost maintained a household, Frost was not required at any time to work while attending school. Not until the summer of 1891, between his junior and senior years in high school, did the overseer's grandson experience life in a textile mill. As Thompson recounts, he had begun the summer doing odd jobs at a farm-cum-resort but left without being paid. Without apparent irony, Thompson describes the experience as an ideological awakening:

> Rob had not worked long in Braithwaite's mill before he found his sympathies were newly allied with the labor organizations which had been stirring up the city with protest-meetings. Never before had his mother's Socialist interest in the doctrines of Henry George or her deep admiration for Bellamy's recently published *Looking Backward* made so much sense to him.[33]

"Except for the long hours," Thompson concludes, "Rob enjoyed the new experience of mingling with the men and women at the mill. He liked the

ways in which their friendliness, their harmless practical jokes, their witticisms, their laughter kept the drudgery from being unbearable."

Cheerful truisms aside, the extent of Frost's "mingling" is open to question, but his drudgery, such as it was, did not extend beyond the start of the school year. After graduation, when he more deliberately sought work in the mills, his status differed appreciably.[34] Had Frost chosen a career in industry, many similar doors in Lawrence would have opened as easily. W. P. Frost, Sr. had never hidden a hope that Robert would study law as preparation for such a career. A Lawrence High School valedictorian, grandson of a Pacific Mills overseer, and son of a schoolteacher and a Harvard Phi Beta Kappa was expected, as Frost well knew, to set his sights high, and it was by such expectations, he knew equally well, that his apparent fecklessness was measured.

Frost's last stint in the mills began in September 1893 when he was hired as a light trimmer in the Arlington Mill. Having left Dartmouth in January and taken over, until March, his mother's unruly class at Methuen Second Grammar (she was transferred to First Primary), Frost had spent the summer caretaking a country retreat to which Mrs. White brought her daughters. With no college plans – despite family disapproval – he failed as impresario for a Shakespearean reader and then looked for real employment.

"On the morning of April 12, 1893," Donald Cole reports in *Immigrant City*, "15,000 workers were out of jobs and for the first time in the memory of most citizens every mill was closed." The city wallowed in a depression until 1896. In 1894, the median weekly wage for all jobs at one Lawrence mill was $5.85; the average was $7.[35] While Frost's recollection of his wage is open to question, there is no doubt that unskilled labor was scarce and that Frost's position in the mill was, in a real sense, privileged. The contradictions in Thompson between humiliating "slavery" and lounging over Shakespeare epitomize his fundamental misunderstanding of the social economy of the mills, a misapprehension that undermines his portrayal of the poet's young adulthood.

Newdick was the first to investigate Frost's early unpublished or uncollected poems, and he took particular interest in those inspired by industrial Lawrence. "Only in his later years," he observes in a chapter entitled "The Music of the Iron," "did Frost reveal in a few published poems that he had observed as closely and as understandingly in the mill as he had on the farm and in the woods. Take, for example, the opening of 'A Lone Striker,' in which the intricacy of the spinning machines and the necessary deftness of the operator were described."

> There was a rule of the mill that latecomers be locked out for half an hour and their pay docked accordingly. Frost, once caught so, made a day of it, going to

> a place in the woods where he could walk, drink from a spring, reflect on the things he loved, all of which represented for him a compelling form of action. So always he was given to rebel against merely formal and institutional claims on him . . .
>
> From time to time *thenceforward*, Frost's manuscript portfolios contained a number of other poems embodying his observations, experience, and reflections as a mill worker.[36] (italics mine)

Citing "The Mill City" and "When the Speed Comes," Newdick contends that "Frost was a practicing American workers' poet before most of the noisy academic 'proletarians' of the nineteen-thirties were out of rompers":

> Of the industrialism that dominated his day, he was conscious from his youth onwards, fully conscious, as only those who have known it at first hand can be. Steadily, too, though never exclusively and disproportionately, he wrote about it. And clearly and repeatedly, though always as an artist rather than a propagandist, he pilloried its insatiable greed, its monstrous tyranny, and its manifold oppressions of free human spirit and effort.[37]

Newdick's broadly overstated defense of Frost's social conscience is akin to those by Bernard DeVoto and others on behalf of the politically beleaguered bard of *A Further Range*. Certainly, Newdick does not distort the poet's past out of all naturalness; he does, however, allow a 1930s mythos of "The Lone Striker" to displace earlier texts and testimony in priority and authenticity. He contributes his part, in other words, toward investing with biographical legitimacy Frost's portrait of the young artist as individualist rebel. Refigured to satisfy ideological exigencies of the 1930s, this identity locates its originatory moment in a spontaneous and disinterested turn from society to solitude, from mindless and mechanical modern work to timeless play-for-mortal-stakes, from factory gate to woodland path and spring.

The symbolic efficacy of this figure for the poet-in-the-making is such that it insinuates itself inextricably, for Frost as well as for his readers and biographers, into the persona of *A Boy's Will*.[38] In *The Trial by Existence*, to cite but one instance, Elizabeth Sergeant conflates the two representative moments of poetic origin. Persuaded – so it seems – by her conversations with the poet in the 1950s, she reads "Into My Own" as complementary to "A Lone Striker":

> It is known that sometime in the spring of this year 1894, R. F. gave up the mill work suddenly, as if under a new star, and found himself another elementary teaching job. As I heard the story, the youngster had arrived late, after the noon hour, and finding the mill doors closed, shouted:
>
> "You can't do this to *me*!" and went off.
>
> A poem ["A Lone Striker"] first printed in 1933 as a Borzoi *Chap Book*, then published in *A Further Range* in 1936, seems autobiographical. [39]

> Frost has told me that this poem ["Into My Own"] represents his first desire to escape from something, his fear of something . . . Frost perhaps irrationally dreaded to be captured by the spinning mills of Lawrence or hauled back into living dependently under the tutelage of elder relatives. [40]

> Which reminds me, have you anything but a sociology teacher's word for it that machine work, monotony and a life in the mills ages people any faster than the confusing variety of life on a farm or the strain of having to think up new material to teach nine hours a week in college?
>
> To C. G. McCormick (1937)[41]

Reviewing *West-Running Brook* in 1928 and *Collected Poems* in 1930, Granville Hicks objected to a lack of attention to contemporary social conditions. What we do not find in Frost's poetically realized New England, he charged, is more important than what we do, for the unified world of Frost's poetry was achieved only through a calculated restriction of vision. Hicks elaborated in 1933:

> Frost has achieved unity by a definite process of exclusion. One not only realizes that life in New Hampshire is not altogether representative of life in the United States as a whole; one has to admit that Frost disregards many elements in New Hampshire life, and especially the elements that link that state with the rest of the country. For example, northern New England has been greatly affected by the growth of industrialism, and yet one would never suspect this from Frost's poetry. Can one believe that it is by accident that he has never written of the factory towns, now so abjectly in decay, or of the exodus to the cities and its failure, now so apparent, to bring deliverance . . . ? No, Frost is too shrewd not to be well aware that he is excluding from his poems whatever might destroy their unity.

"Frost's experience is close to ours," Hicks allowed, and "we can share his appreciations and insights." To the extent that Frost concerns himself only with what is "personally congenial" and "poetically available," however, he leaves us discontented:

> He has chosen to identify himself with a moribund tradition. Many poets, these hundred and fifty years, have written of mountains, fields, and brooks, and of farmers at their humble tasks; these things have become part of our imaginative inheritance, and one must be insensitive indeed not to be conscious of the beauty in them. But there are other objects now more frequently before our eyes – factories, skyscrapers, machines. We see mechanics, shop-girls, truck-drivers, more often than we do farmers . . . There is new territory that we beg the poet to conquer for us. Perhaps to-day no poet is capable of that conquest, but, if the task is ever to be accomplished, some one with the talent of a Robert Frost must make a beginning. [42]

In December 1933, Frost alerted John Bartlett to a publication impending. "I shall soon be out," he wrote in mock solemnity, "with a ponderous book of one poem on how I detached myself from the mills of Man in Lawrence Mass but without prejudice to machinery industry or an industrial age so that there will be no mistake in the record."[43] Published as a pamphlet in 1933 under the more assertive title of "The Lone Striker," and as "A Lone Striker" in *A Further Range* (1936), the poem is to be taken, in part, as a rebuttal to Hicks. Why had the criticism touched so responsive a chord? Hicks' Marxist politics were, of course, a sufficient irritant, but what rankled was the more dismissive allegation, by a fellow New Englander, of escapist irrelevance.[44] "Hicks says I'm an escapist" had become a refrain in Frost's conversation long before he complained as much in a letter to Theodore Morrison in 1938. Still setting the record straight in the 1937 talk that would become "Poverty and Poetry," Frost engaged the ideological enemy under the cover of humorous detachment:

> Suppose I begin with that very poem about me and the mills in Lawrence. This one is called, "The Lone Striker." It is all right to be a striker, but not a lone striker. You might think that I might get in right with my radical friends, but the trouble with me is that I was a lone striker; if I called it a "collectivist striker," that would be another matter. This was the way it was to me, not a very serious thing. (*CPPP*, 763)

A serious step is lightly taken, and Frost invites us to admire the casual boldness of the poet-speaker in setting off into his own, to acknowledge, again, how a solitary way can make all the difference. In the satisfaction of its sureties – "Nor was this just a way of talking/ To save him the expense of doing./ With him it boded action, deed" – the poem has tempted ironists. Thompson and others have remarked the gap between the symbolic clarity of poetic closure and the prosaic clutter of biographical fact: "The path he soon found himself walking was a bitterly familiar one. A replacement was needed for a substitute teacher in tiny District School Number Nine in South Salem."[45] Caught between its dramatic form and its didactic purpose, between character and commentary, "A Lone Striker" has raised in readers all the aesthetic misgivings common to Frost's polemical dramas from "New Hampshire" to "Kitty Hawk." Critical scruples notwithstanding, however, the poem remains fundamental to the representation of Frost's cultural identity.

By any measure, "A Lone Striker" is among the least "proletarian" – unless we strip the term of all of its historical associations – of Frost's poems about either lives of labor or the contemporary political climate. Throughout the late 1930s, as in the "Poverty and Poetry" reading, he used the poem to

illustrate his distrust of activist, collectivist, or labor unionist sentiment on the political or literary left. True measure of the poem, however, can be taken only by attending to both the play of present ideological purpose and the ground of the past on which it is enacted. The hearty sententiousness of the narrative commentary makes bland parable of potential drama, but the poem retains traces of a more complex, and conflicted, experience of the scene Frost saw or thought he saw.

Early in his time at the Arlington mills, Thompson writes in *The Early Years*, Frost "had admired the deftness of the girls who worked in the wool-dusty atmosphere, the quick motions of their fingers as they reached in among taut threads to snatch up broken ends and twist them quickly together." As time passed, however, "he began to feel that these girls were forced to become human spiders; that all these threads seemed to be drawn, at a debilitating speed, from their insides. He tried to catch his own mood of resentment later, in a sonnet which did reflect his bitter disapproval of such endless mill work."[46] Transposing "When the Speed Comes" and "A Lone Striker," Thompson carries Frost from detachment to empathy, from aesthetics to ethics, from his least proletarian poem to perhaps his most sincerely so:

> When the speed comes a creeping overhead
> And belts begin to snap and shafts to creak,
> And the sound dies away of them that speak,
> And on the glassy floor the tapping tread;
> When dusty globes on all a pallor shed,
> And breaths of many wheels are on the cheek;
> Unwilling is the flesh, the spirit weak,
> All effort like arising from the dead.
>
> But the task ne'er could wait the mood to come,
> The music of the iron is a law:
> And as upon the heavy spools that pay
> Their slow white thread, so ruthlessly the hum
> Of countless whirling spindles seems to draw
> Upon the soul, still sore from yesterday.

Describing the familiar evils of textile piecework in relation to the Lawrence strike of 1912, Ardis Cameron has noted that "In almost all cases operatives worked according to the pace and rhythm of the machine that required workers to adjust to the demands of production requirements":

> Seemingly controlled by swirling belts, vibrating wooden frames, and thundering looms and spindles, workers felt intensely alienated from the work process. "They call them 'devils' and not machinery," remarked a member of the strike

> committee. [P]ieceworkers were dependent upon speed so that wages suffered as output declined, and jobs remained in constant jeopardy.[47]

As the "straining mill began to shake," the lone striker outside finds that "The mill, though many, many eyed,/ Had eyes inscrutably opaque;/ So that he couldn't look inside/ To see if some forlorn machine/ Was standing idle for his sake." The vision that follows demonstrates how obscured for Frost the reality of the workers had become and how dimly, if poetically, perceived it had always been:

> And yet he thought he saw the scene:
> The air was full of dust of wool.
> A thousand yarns were under pull,
> But pull so slow, with such a twist,
> All day from spool to lesser spool,
> It seldom overtaxed their strength;
> They safely grew in slender length.
> And if one broke by any chance,
> The spinner saw it at a glance.
> The spinner still was there to spin.
>
> That's where the human still came in.
> Her deft hand showed with finger rings
> Among the harp-like spread of strings.
> She caught the pieces end to end
> And, with a touch that never missed,
> Not so much tied as made them blend.
> Man's ingenuity was good.

"Spinners," Cameron notes, "who worked in damp and humid rooms, were especially vulnerable to tuberculosis, the 'white plague,' and pneumonia. In the years before the 1912 strike, one third of Lawrence's spinners would die before they had worked ten years, and half of these would never reach the age of 25."[48]

Of the days in the Arlington mills, Newdick writes that Frost

> discovered that human nature would somehow find playful expression even under the burdens of wages of ten cents an hour, a ten-hour day, and a sixty-hour week. "I used to think the mill people, scooting home in the dark, were sad," he once recalled, "till I worked in the mill, and heard them singing and laughing and throwing bobbins up at me as I stood up on a ladder fixing the lights."[49]

Of these workers, he continues, Frost wrote poems "full to the heart's depth with compassion," poems that "voiced his purpose really to know workers and to understand their problems":[50]

It was in a drear city by a stream,
And all its denizens were sad to me, –
I could not fathom what their life could be –
Their passage in the morning like a dream
In the arc-light's unnatural bluish beam,
Then back, at night, like drowned men from the sea,
Up from the mills and river hurriedly,
In weeds of labor, to the shriek of steam.

Yet I supposed that they had all one hope
With me (there is but one.) I would go out,
When happier ones drew in for fear of doubt,
Breasting their current, resolute to cope
With what thoughts they compelled who thronged the street,
Less to the sound of voices than of feet.

Written a decade after Frost worked in the Arlington mills, "The Mill City" depicts its somber procession in terms unrelated to "scooting" and declares its solemn purpose without any insight into laughing millhands at their labors. The change in perspective that Frost described to Newdick seems more closely related to the political positioning of the 1930s than the aesthetic posturing of the 1890s. A genre painting after the fashion of Winslow Homer's *Bell Time* (1868), "The Mill City" testifies to the divide between the poet-hero and the undifferentiated throng for whom he promises – or presumes – to speak. The studied fastidiousness of the speaker's resolution recalls the *fin de siècle* affectations of Frost's observations for the Lawrence *American* in 1895:

> I am going to betray a confidence and worse than that, a poor man's confidence, but only in the hope of compelling for him your natural if unrighteous sympathy.
>
> There are a lot of women and children that have let me see them looting coal in a yard near here. They come with buckets and gather it piece by piece under the coal cars. It is feverish work keeping warm, for such people. And the curious part of it is, they will not take the coal otherwise than from off the ground, which necessitates their twice handling it, once from the car to the ground, and again from the ground to the bucket. The moral strain attendant on such work must be excessive and one suffers to watch them skulking and stooping all day.[51]

While working as a reporter for the *American* in 1895, Thompson notes, Frost "was sent to the Arlington Mill in Lawrence to gather information about labor difficulties which had resulted in a strike, and he went directly to the main office to call on a Mr. Hartshorn, whom he and his mother knew. It was a friendly and informative visit, but Hartshorn kept interweaving so many

confidences ("Don't write about what I'm going to tell you now.") that by the time Frost left the mill he saw no way of writing up the story without betraying a friendship."[52] Formerly Superintendent of the Worsted Department, William D. Hartshorn was Resident Agent of the Arlington Mills and thus, in essence, its chief executive officer. Frost's experience of Lawrence was shaped, of course, not only by William Prescott Frost's career in the mills but also by Isabelle Frost's Swedenborgian interests, which brought the family into contact, as Thompson noted in 1946, with a wide range of persons, including "several of the most prominent men in Lawrence."[53]

Frost in 1912 was teaching at the Normal School in Plymouth, NH and, having sold the farm in Derry bequeathed him by his grandfather, was planning to embark with his family upon a literary adventure to England. In June, he wrote to Wilbur Rowell, a prominent Lawrence attorney and magistrate who served as executor of the estate of William Prescott Frost:

> I felt almost sorry to be so far from Lawrence when the syndicalist strike was on. How much Lawrence has and has not changed since I left the town twelve years ago! The Letts and the Portuguese and the Greeks and the Syrians are all quite new. But at the same time they appear not to have altogether displaced the older population. I never heard of the Syrian dentist who was for dying a martyr to the cause at the hands of the militia. But I was going to say I knew all the other people the papers mentioned from Clark Carter to John Breen. I went to one college with Danny Murphy, to another with Louis Cox. I went to the Hampshire St. school with John Breen. I am proudest to have known John – as you may suppose. (*SL*, 48)

At the height of the strike, Rowell had published a defense of Lawrence in *The Survey*, declaring it to be "a typical New England industrial city, with all the equipment and resources that are found in such a city for generous and noble life, and for the sympathetic relief of weakness and suffering."

With Rowell's civic and national pride and with his genteel assimilationism, Frost would have been in perfect accord.[54] Thus, Frost's use of the immigrant cycle as a shorthand for local history in his letter to Rowell was as natural as his assessment of ethnic shifts was accurate. The Syrian dentist, Dr. Haztar, had been the subject of testimony by Captain John Sullivan, Lawrence Chief Marshal, at Congressional hearings in March 1912: "I know of a Syrian doctor," said the Captain, "who had no connection with the strike, who asked for twenty-five men to go with him to throw themselves on the bayonets of the soldiers to arouse sympathy for the cause."[55]

A young Frost had forsworn industrial Lawrence and any professional career for which his grandfather would have prepared him. As the older Frost of "A Lone Striker" is at pains to make clear, however, he had had no ideological quarrel with the system.